

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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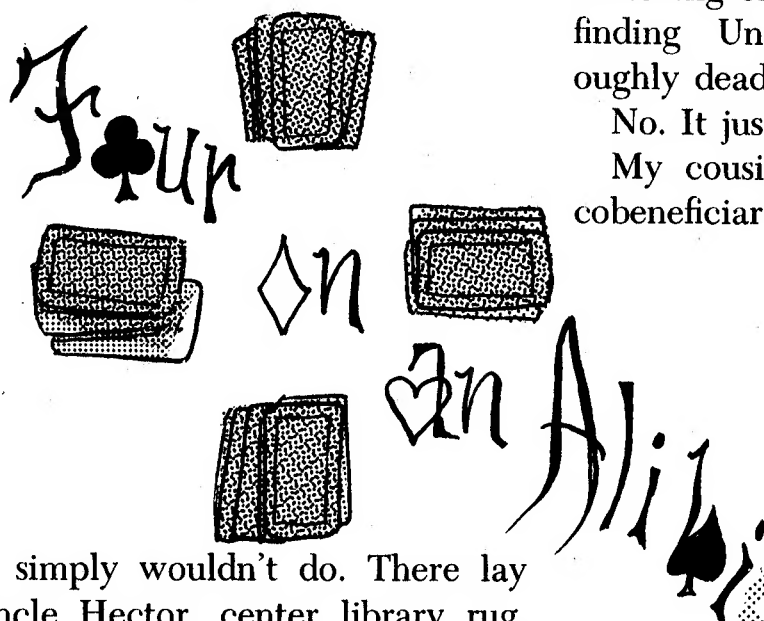
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When one goes plinking, he should be sure of his ground.



switching on the library lights and finding Uncle Hector so thoroughly dead.

No. It just wouldn't do.

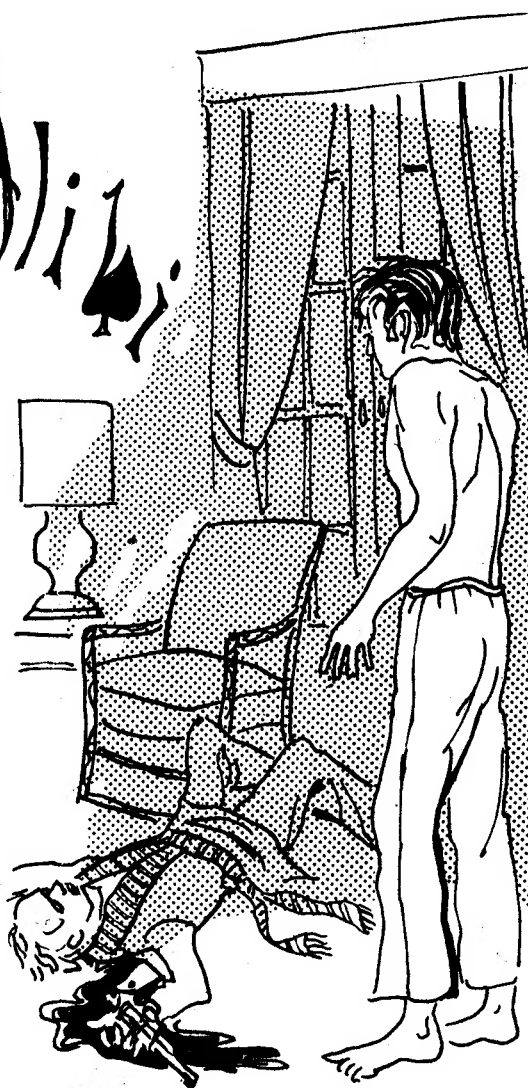
My cousin Clarence and I are cobeneficiaries of my uncle's es-

It simply wouldn't do. There lay Uncle Hector, center library rug, in a pool of blood, with a revolver in his right hand.

I had been upstairs in bed, though awake, when I heard the shot. I had immediately slipped into the nether half of my pajamas and gone down to investigate.

On the first floor I opened a number of doors before finally

by Jack Ritchie



tate—which I estimate at perhaps two million—and I could foresee no difficulty in that direction.

However, there still remained the question of Uncle Hector's life insurance. Its face value was some four hundred thousand dollars—Clarence and I again cobeneficiaries—but, of course, it would be automatically canceled in the event of suicide.

I sighed. Yes, it must appear that Uncle Hector had been murdered.

He had come downstairs for some reason—let us say that he had heard a noise—and had fallen upon an intruder, who had promptly shot and killed him.

Yes, that ought to do it; neat, clean, simple.

I went to the French windows. Using the corner of a drape, I unlocked one of them and left it slightly ajar. A draft of wind emphasized that it was quite chilly outside.

I removed the revolver from Uncle Hector's right hand and frowned. It was my Smith & Wesson .38. I had used it that very morning for plinking in the woods back of the house.

Usually when I am through shooting, I clean the weapon and return it to the locked gun cabinet in my bedroom. However, I had intended to go out again in

the afternoon and so had merely dropped it into one of my bureau drawers. Evidently Uncle Hector had slipped into my dressing room while I was not there and taken it.

I would have to dispose of the gun, of course—throw it into some river or other convenient body of water.

I would do that tomorrow. If I attempted getting one of the cars out of the garage now, it would undoubtedly wake one of the servants quartered in the apartments above.

I surveyed the room again. Everything seemed quite in order.

When I left, I turned off the lights, making certain that any prints on the toggle were thoroughly smudged.

I found a dust cloth in one of the utility closets at the rear of the house and used it to wipe the fingerprints off the gun.

What should I do with the weapon until tomorrow? I thought it precautionary to hide the gun, and as far from my person as possible.

My eyes fell upon the vacuum cleaner in a corner of the closet. Ideal. I slipped the revolver into its bag.

No one else in the house seemed to have heard the shot, or at least bothered to investigate,

though Danvers and several other of the servants occupied the third floor.

Should I tell any member of the family what I had just done? No, the fewer people who knew about it, the better.

Besides, Cousin Clarence wasn't even in his rooms. He was out again on one of those all-night card games of his.

What about Marian, Clarence's wife? Should I wake her and tell her that Uncle Hector had been murdered?

No. Frankly I preferred for some servant to find the body in the morning and initiate the alarm.

I went upstairs. At my bedroom door I paused to think over the entire situation once more. Then I shrugged and went inside to my bed.

I slept fitfully. In the morning when Danvers came up with some freshly laundered shirts, I waited for a possible announcement, but evidently the body hadn't been discovered yet.

After showering and dressing, I went downstairs and joined Marian at the breakfast table.

"Is Clarence home yet?" I asked.

She nodded. "He staggered in at five or so. Naturally he's asleep now."

Marian is some ten or so years younger than her husband and may be described as being the very antithesis of Twiggy. She possesses an equable nature, a considerable asset when living with someone like Clarence.

She helped herself to bacon. "Uncle Hector seems to be late this morning."

A female scream came piercingly from the hall.

Marian was only mildly startled. "What was *that*?"

I listened to a second and a third scream, the last of a slightly different timbre. "Offhand, I'd say that came from one or more of the maids."

Danvers came into the room bearing the news. "Sir, it seems that one of the maids has just come upon the body of your uncle in the library. He appears to have been the victim of foul play."

I found two maids, white-faced and wide-eyed, just outside the library door. They both pointed urgently.

Yes, Uncle Hector was still in there, though a bit stiffer than when I had seen him last.

I took charge immediately. "Has anyone touched anything?"

"No, sir," one of the maids said swiftly. "I just opened the door and there he lay. I didn't even

take one step inside the room."

I nodded approvingly. "Good. We will now close the library door and phone the police."

Marian peered over my shoulder. "How do we know for certain that Uncle Hector is dead? Maybe he could use some first aid?"

"My dear Marian," I said, "I have seen dead men in my time and Uncle Hector is one of them."

I phoned the police.

After six minutes a squad car arrived. The officers appraised the situation and went back to their car radio. In short order a detachment of detectives and a platoon of technical and medical technicians took over.

Marian, Danvers and I waited in the drawing room until a Lieutenant Spangler, who seemed to be in charge, finally joined us.

He sat down. "Did any one of you hear the shot?"

Marian, Danvers and I indicated that we had not.

Spangler nodded. "Guns usually don't make as much noise as people think." He opened a notebook. "Now, since your uncle appears to have been murdered, then obviously someone murdered him."

I agreed. "Undoubtedly some intruder. A burglar, or what have you. Poor Uncle Hector heard a

noise and went to investigate. The intruder shot him and immediately fled, possibly by way of some open French window."

"Possibly." Spangler rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "How much is your uncle worth?"

I didn't think such a question appropriate in a cut-and-dried case like this one, but I answered. "Somewhere in the neighborhood of two million. My cousin Clarence Hackett and I are the principal heirs."

"Your cousin Clarence?"

"My husband," Marian explained. "Clarence is still upstairs in bed. He isn't feeling too well."

Spangler sympathized, but persisted. "You don't suppose you could wake him?"

Marian sent Danvers up to wake Clarence.

Spangler turned his attention back to me. "Did anyone touch anything in the library?"

"Absolutely nothing. No one even entered the room."

"When was the last time you saw your uncle alive?"

"About eight-thirty. I passed by the drawing room and he was in here watching television."

Marian nodded. "I went to bed early—about nine. He was still in here engrossed in a Western."

Spangler seemed to consider that for a moment. "I noticed that

the light switch controlling the library's central lighting fixture is turned off. Also none of the lamps are on. Would your uncle go to investigate a strange noise in the dark?"

Damn it, why had I turned off the lights when I left the library? Pure habit, of course, but it made things sticky. "He was trying to *surprise* the intruder," I said. "So naturally he wouldn't turn on any lights."

"If he was going to surprise this prowler, why wasn't he armed with some kind of a weapon? A gun, a club? Something. Also, your uncle was drilled neatly through the heart. So, did this intruder first kill your uncle in a lighted room and then thriftily turn off the lights before he left?"

I smiled firmly. "Undoubtedly the intruder carried a flashlight. He used its illumination to shoot my uncle and then departed. By the French window, I suppose."

Spangler regarded me for a moment. "How did you and your uncle get along?"

Actually Uncle Hector and I disliked each other, though not to any serious extent. "We never had any arguments," I said truthfully.

Spangler nodded slowly. "I don't suppose you would mind if one of our people conducted a little test to determine if there

might be gunpowder grains embedded in one of your hands?"

Gunpowder grains? Good Heavens! Of course there would be gunpowder grains embedded in my hands. After all, I'd been out in the woods behind the house just yesterday morning plinking with that .38.

I laughed lightly. "Actually you *would* find gunpowder grains on my hands. You see, yesterday morning I went plinking in the woods."

"Rather a coincidence," he suggested. "Plinking in the woods on the very day your uncle was murdered?"

"Not at all," I said defensively. "I often plink in the woods."

One of Spangler's assistants came in and whispered into his ear. Spangler excused himself and left the room.

Danvers joined us again. "I succeeded in waking your husband, madam, and elevating him to his feet. I informed him of what has happened and he is now taking a shower."

Spangler returned after fifteen minutes. "One of your maids found a gun in a vacuum-cleaner bag she was emptying. I think it might be the murder weapon. Why else would anyone want to hide it there?"

Damn the maid. Why the devil

did she have to empty a vacuum cleaner bag when the house was full of police?

"Does anyone in this room own a .38 Smith & Wesson revolver?" Spangler asked.

I hesitated. Since the weapon was registered in my name, it could certainly be traced to me. On the other hand, I had thoroughly wiped off any fingerprints before hiding it, so I could see no point in putting myself closer to the gun than necessary.

I cleared my throat. "I *used* to own a .38 revolver, but I gave it to my Uncle Hector two weeks ago."

Spangler smiled faintly. "I wonder how the intruder got hold of the gun?"

"As I reconstruct the crime," I said helpfully, "Uncle Hector came down here *armed* with the gun. There was a brief struggle—or possibly protracted, for all I know—but anyway, the intruder wrested the gun from Uncle Hector's hand, shot him, and then fled."

Spangler rubbed at the smile. "Shot your uncle? Wiped the fingerprints from the gun? Turned off the lights? Hid the gun in the vacuum-cleaner bag? Returned to the library and fled through the French window?"

It did sound a little shaky at

that, when it was reiterated.

"When was the last time you fired that revolver?" Spangler asked.

"Two weeks ago, when I gave it to Uncle Hector. I haven't touched it since."

"Did *he* ever fire it?"

"Numerous times. He often went plinking in the woods himself. We are a family of plinkers."

Spangler made himself comfortable in an easy chair. "One of our people found fingerprints."

I frowned. "I thought you just said that the fingerprints had been wiped from the gun?"

"They were. However, we found quite decent prints on the cartridges *inside* the gun chambers. You don't exactly load a revolver with your teeth, you know. Most people use their fingers and fingers leave fingerprints."

I felt that I might actually perspire, something ordinarily too plebeian for me even to consider. Of course my fingerprints would be on the cartridges—particularly the very one which had killed Uncle Hector.

My laugh was slightly high-pitched. "Lieutenant, I haven't *fired* the gun since I gave it to Uncle Hector, but I *did* reload it for him just the other day. You see, he happened to be busy at the moment and so he asked

me if I would reload”

No, that was weak.

“Lieutenant,” I said, “I have a confession to make.”

He got that damn smile again. “I’ll get a stenographer.”

I held up a hand. “Not *that* kind of a confession.”

“What kind are you offering?”

“Actually, Uncle Hector shot himself.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. Suicide.” My smile seemed to hurt. “Last night at approximately eleven-thirty I heard a shot. I came down here to investigate and found Uncle Hector lying there on the library rug. The gun was in his hand. Obviously he had shot himself.”

Spangler smiled patiently.

I was definitely perspiring. “I took the gun away from Uncle Hector, wiped off the fingerprints, and hid the gun.”

“Why would you want to do all of that?”

Should I tell him about the insurance? Somehow that would make me appear greedy and that is one thing I am not.

“There is a certain stigma to suicide,” I said, a trifle loftily. “I did what I did to protect the family name. I felt it would be much kinder to make the incident seem like murder by an intruder.”

“What did you do with the sui-

cide note your uncle wrote?”

“There wasn’t any suicide note.”

“Why would your uncle want to kill himself?”

“I really haven’t the faintest idea.”

“Were the lights on when you found him?”

Those damn lights again. What difference did it make? “No,” I said, remembering. “I turned them on and there he was.”

“So your uncle committed suicide in the dark?”

“Obviously.”

Spangler shook his head. “People just don’t commit suicide in the dark. Don’t ask me why, but they don’t. They may close their eyes, but they never turn off the lights.”

I wiped my forehead with a handkerchief. “Uncle Hector should have powder grains on one of his hands, shouldn’t he? Have you tested for that?”

Spangler decided to give that a fair try. He left the room, apparently to join the technicians in the library and have them perform a test.

Danvers watched me. “Shall I get you a dry handkerchief, sir?”

“Shut up,” I said.

After a while, Spangler came back. “There are absolutely no gunpowder grains on your uncle’s

hands. We checked thoroughly."

I was stunned.

No powder grains? That meant that Uncle Hector really *had* been murdered and his murderer had attempted to make the crime seem like suicide.

Here I stood, powder grains on my hands, my gun as the murder weapon, my fingerprints on the cartridges in that murder weapon, the possessor of an immense motive.

I was lost.

Marian rose. "Lieutenant, at the time of the murder, my cousin Ambrose and I were together."

Good old Marian. Awfully decent of her to put her reputation on the line like that.

Spangler regarded her warily. "I thought you said you went to bed at nine?"

She smiled thinly. "I meant to say that I *retired* to the suite my husband and I occupy on the second floor. Ambrose joined me there slightly after nine." She turned to Danvers. "Isn't that right, Danvers? You were there too, and we *all* played bridge."

Danvers rose to the occasion. "Of course, madam. We played bridge until we heard the shot at eleven-thirty and that broke up the game."

Spangler's eyes were quite narrow. "You and your cousin played

bridge with your butler?" he said.

She drew herself up. "Whatever I am, I am not a snob."

The drawing room door opened and my cousin Clarence was ushered in by one of Spangler's assistants.

Clarence is a rather large, bulky man. His eyes were still a bit bloodshot and he walked with a wince that indicated he did not welcome the day this early, despite a hair of the dog.

Spangler turned on him. "And just where were *you* last night at the time of the murder?"

Clarence took umbrage at the tone of his voice. "Where the hell would I be? I was in bed with my wife."

Why did Clarence have to say that? He had a perfectly good alibi of his own, didn't he? Those people he played cards with all night?

Marian laughed lightly for Spangler's benefit. "My husband means that *after* midnight he and I went to bed. *Prior* to that, until we heard the shot at *eleven-thirty*, all *four* of us were in our suite playing bridge. My husband, my cousin Ambrose, Danvers and I."

Clarence seemed to chew on his moustache, though he had none. "Ah, yes. We heard the shot at eleven-thirty."

I supplied him with more grist. "We heard the shot and all *four* of us went downstairs. We found Uncle Hector apparently a suicide and we decided that for the sake of the family name, we ought to make it appear as though Uncle Hector had been murdered by an intruder."

Clarence swayed slightly. "We certainly did."

I smiled. "Of course our humanitarian gesture did not succeed, and now we are back to the fact that Uncle Hector was truly murdered. Undoubtedly by an intruder."

Clarence went to the liquor cabinet. "I couldn't have put it more succinctly myself."

Spangler and his staff spent the rest of the morning questioning us individually, but as far as I could tell, our story seemed to hold. For the time being, at least.

During a break in the interrogation, I met Clarence upstairs.

"Clarence," I said. "I don't understand why you didn't simply give Spangler the names of the people you played cards with last night. Surely that would have been sufficient to establish your whereabouts at the time Uncle Hector was murdered."

He smiled tolerantly. "One does not drag the names of one's friends into something like this."

"But surely in a case of murder they would understand."

He decided to give me the man-to-man confidential explanation. "Actually, Ambrose, it is not so *much who* I played cards with that I wish to conceal, but *where*. Madam La Fontaine and her charges could get into all sorts of trouble and I certainly wouldn't want that."

Madam La Fontaine? I had heard she had a heart of gold and gave Green Stamps.

I went to my bedroom and lay down on my bed.

So be it. Four on an alibi was better than three, and I needed all the alibi I could get.

I sighed. Surely Uncle Hector *must* have been murdered by an intruder. He had heard the noise downstairs. He had let himself into my dressing room, gotten the revolver from the dresser, and gone downstairs to investigate. In the library he had been overwhelmed by the intruder and shot.

That really did seem the most logical explanation for his death.

On the other hand, how would Uncle Hector have known that I had put the revolver in that particular drawer?

I couldn't see how he would.

Perhaps the intruder himself had found the weapon and taken it downstairs with him?

I went to the dresser and pulled open the top drawer.

I had placed the gun right here beside the tray containing my collection of cuff links, all of them patently expensive; and next to the tray still lay the two jeweled lighters I seldom used and also the engraved cigarette case.

If the intruder had come upon the gun, why hadn't he taken all of these things too? Why just the gun?

No, your typical intruder simply would not leave that much loot undisturbed.

The conclusion was obvious. The gun hadn't been taken by an intruder, nor by Uncle Hector.

Then by whom? Clarence?

No. He also couldn't have known that I had put the gun in that drawer instead of the cabinet as usual.

Marian?

No, but who?

Danvers came into the room. "Lunch is being served, sir."

I stared at him.

Danvers? But of course.

He had been in my room gathering clothes to send off to the dry cleaners when I had returned from plinking. He had *seen* me put the gun away.

I pointed an accusing finger. "Danvers, it was *you* who killed Uncle Hector!"

He regarded me warily. "Really, sir?"

"Of course. Only *you* knew that I had put that revolver in that particular drawer." I smiled grimly. "At this very moment, your hands are probably impregnated with thousands of grains of gunpowder."

He shook his head. "I doubt that, sir. Before I killed your uncle, I took a long walk on the grounds, brooding upon the necessity and whipping up enough courage for the deed. It was quite chilly, so I wore a topcoat and gloves. Luckily I was still wearing them when I shot your uncle, and since learning about this gunpowder business, I have destroyed both the gloves and the topcoat and thoroughly stirred the ashes, so to speak."

"So it was you who turned out the lights when you left the library?"

"A habit, sir. Automatic, I'm afraid, even under stress."

"Why did you kill him?"

"He had given me notice earlier in the day, sir. Something about a shortage in the household accounts, of which I am totally innocent, sir. However, you know how intransigent your uncle could be. I realized there was no hope for reason or reconciliation."

"You killed him because he

fired you? Really, Danvers!"

"Not entirely, sir. However, I knew that in a better day I had been included in his will to the extent of fifteen thousand dollars. It followed that he would immediately cancel that provision and I just couldn't see parting with that much money."

"So you killed Uncle Hector for a lousy fifteen thousand dollars?"

"Sir," he said reproachfully, "in *my* circle fifteen thousand dollars is not at all lousy."

"Danvers," I said, "as a Concerned Citizen, I feel that it is now my duty to inform Lieutenant Spangler that you have confessed to murder."

He smiled faintly. "After I shot your uncle, I hid in the shadows of the hall when I heard a door being opened on the second floor. I looked up, sir, and it was you coming down to investigate."

I stiffened slightly. "You saw me coming out of my bedroom?"

"No, sir. I saw you coming out of *Mrs. Hackett's* suite. Adjusting the nether half of your pajamas, sir." He clucked his tongue reprovingly. "Sir, I do not believe that you and Mrs. Hackett *ever* play cards up there at all."

I rubbed my neck. Unfortu-

nately that was quite true. I actually *had* been in Marian's suite last night, but we had not been playing cards. As a matter of fact, Marian and I *never* waste our time playing cards on those nights when Clarence is off to Madam La Fontaine's or whatever.

"Danvers," I said sternly, "that has absolutely nothing to do with the matter of murder. Absolutely nothing at all."

"Perhaps not, sir, but I do think that if I must confess to murder I ought to tell the lieutenant, and possibly an open court, everything which occurred and was observed on the night in question. That is routine, isn't it, sir?"

We were both silent for a while.

Danvers smiled again. "Do you play bridge at all, sir?"

"I'm afraid not, Danvers. I don't know a thing about the game."

He nodded. "I thought not, sir. And that could be a dangerous flaw in our collective alibi, don't you think, sir?"

He deftly removed a pack of playing cards from the inside pocket of his jacket and proceeded to teach me the fundamentals of the game of bridge.